

MY ART AND KITTY

Problems of a Primary Teacher Who Had Aspirations

By LEONORA BECK ELLIS

I GREW up an orphan in a boarding-school where expenses were reasonable and advantages fair. The bachelor uncle who had provided for me from babyhood, but never had me with him, died a month before my graduation, and nothing was left of his estate except debts and legal tangles. So I thought myself fortunate when I secured the position of primary teacher in Glendale Institute.

I was only nineteen, and possessed no enthusiasm for teaching in itself. My brain and heart were too full of idle fancies and selfish ambitions, which had come to fill my heart in the absence of all home ties. I looked on teaching as mere drudgery, and intended to use it only as a stepping-stone to something I thought far higher.

My art—oh, what dreams pursued me! Let me hasten to save a thousand dollars, hurry abroad, have lessons, work with mad zeal, then leap to the topmost pinnacle in my beautiful art!

A thousand dollars isn't easy to save when one's salary is only three hundred a year above board and the vacations are to be provided for. Young and sometimes called pretty, I thought that two hundred dollars a year spent on dress represented the closest possible economy. Honesty compels me to interpolate here that I cannot recollect anyone's calling me pretty except John Archibald, and of course John's opinion on any subject whatsoever meant little to me; for John was just a plain, everyday young fellow, honorable and wholesome as the sunshine, but terribly practical, in fact mundane, in all his views and projects. He resented my art dreams, and I detested what I called his lack of ideals.

At the end of four years' teaching I had saved only two hundred dollars, and Europe and the masters were still far beyond my reach.

I don't know why they had retained me as primary teacher at Glendale. Certainly there was no hint of future promotion, and I have realized since how far from excellent my work was while I taught for money and dreamed of art. But when I had counted my savings thoughtfully I remarked, "This is a fair nest-egg. I shall put by the rest quickly. I must renounce all folly, and especially go to economizing in dress." John, being my prime folly, I sent away forever, and settled down to work in good earnest.

Then it was that Edward's letter came. "I am dying, Gail, and there is no one to send my little girl to except you," he wrote. "Nor have I any money left for the child, but with our uncle's estate you ought to find it easy to provide for her. Take her, be good to her, and so Heaven will deal with you."

I did not remember my half-brother Edward, who had left home in the forgotten days when we had a home. And he never had remembered me. I told myself now in bitterness, until he needed me. No, I did not want the child, could not take her. She would interfere with my ambitions; she would tie me to drudgery, defeat my aspirations, rob me of my art. Why, it would be as bad as taking John! I wrote a cold letter rejecting my brother's death-bed request, and hastened to mail it, wondering, meantime, if a telegram would not be better.

When I came back to my room, a lonely little figure sat there by the window. Trustingly the small creature came to me.

"Aren't you Aunt Gail? I'm Kitty. Papa's friend brought me to you, because papa had to go far away, but he said you would love me."

I did not want to love her. I did not want her; she was an intruder thrust into my life, and I had the right quietly to put her aside. The wicked part of me said all this within rapidly and vehemently, while the child and I gazed at each other. Thankful am I that the wicked part was not all of me; for when Kitty asked me, still in sweet confidence, "Haven't you forgotten to kiss me, Aunt Gail?" I stooped and took her in my arms, and have loved her dearly ever since.

For two months I had Kitty to board with me at



"Couldn't We Arrange the Home to Accommodate Three?"

the institute; but the arrangement proved unsatisfactory. It was expensive, and was not good for the child. I began to comprehend some things, and one day told myself suddenly that Kitty and I must have a home. It had been borne in upon me that my life had missed something sweet and uplifting, and with the realization of the loss came also the dear hope that I might find it yet. A home—what sacred meanings it might impart to existence!

Nobody could have been kinder than President Haden of our board of trustees when I talked to him about Kitty. "A home for the little one, Miss Burton? Yes, I speak for all, and give you permission to move from the institute. We will call your salary five hundred dollars when you board yourself."

I walked on air, straight to Widow Blount's, who agreed to rent me half her tiny cottage for eight dollars a month. I drew a hundred dollars from the bank, and fitted up our little nest, beginning with a snug kitchen in the rear, then a cosy and tasteful sitting-room, where we also should dine and have tea, and finally our spacious room, where I set up two white beds, a pretty dresser and chiffonier, a handsome screen, and all the personal belongings that we two had.

You might have thought our nest cheap and bare, but never did two prouder housekeepers take possession of their establishment. My hundred dollars was gone for furnishings, and I had to draw out twenty more when I paid for the screen and our forget-me-not tea-service. This left only eighty dollars in the bank for the rainy days that might come; but I stoutly set out to keep house and dress us both within my salary, and still put aside a little to educate Kitty on. We kept no maid, only paid a woman fifty cents for every Saturday morning's cleaning. I did the rest of our work, with Kitty's help, and my part indeed was easy, with her little feet trotting joyously after me.

The table cost us fifteen dollars a month. We might have lived on even less at that time in our little college town, where gardens and orchards

abounded; but it was Kitty's growing-time, and close care and some extra expense were required for her food. By much study and contriving, I achieved the feat of dressing myself and my little one on a hundred dollars a year while she was so small. How the old dresses were refashioned, cut down, each scrap saved, everything made to do duty twice or thrice over! It was not easy, for a teacher has to appear well at all times; yet I found a certain relish and sweetness in the small sacrifices and the contriving and planning.

Now, out of a balance of a hundred and fifty dollars a year I had to provide for the unemployed summer months, meet incidental expenses of various sorts, and pay for fuel and occasional doctor's bills. The latter were rare, as I naturally was strong and exercised utmost care with my small charge. Out of my salary the first year after Kitty's advent I was able to put only twenty dollars in the bank; but I had not drawn on the eighty dollars left there before.

But with the new interest in my life, the pleasant stimulus and the new unselfishness, I had begun to work as never before, and to my surprise soon found a joy in teaching and heights beyond me that I might aspire to climb. When, therefore, in our second year's home-keeping venture, good fortune came to me in the form of promotion to a higher grade in the institute, I was elated no less over the recognition of my better work than over the increase of salary, which I needed so much for Kitty. They gave me her tuition at the institute too, and she and I danced for joy. She now was nine years old, and strong enough to begin her education. And she should have music, she should "inherit" my art! We were as happy as two princesses.

Five dollars a month of the additional ten had to go for a piano now. Kitty had her practice morning and afternoon, and I sang often in the evenings; but for a long time I did not sing, after my old schoolmate wrote me from the city that John Archibald was going to marry an heiress there, his employer's only daughter. How can a man forget so easily? Well, I had Kitty!

When the third year of our housekeeping was closing, I thought that I must celebrate the anniversary by giving a little supper to two of Kitty's friends and two of mine. I was deep in the preparations for this party the day before our happy date, and scarcely noticed when the bell called Kitty. Then a curious thing happened. To this hour nobody knows how the child made that famous mistake of showing the caller into our snug kitchen instead of to the sitting-room adjoining. Perhaps it was that her elation over the approaching party had run too high, perhaps only her excitement over something she divined in the stranger's face and manner.

At any rate, when I looked up from my pie-pinking and trilling I found John Archibald's good, honest eyes fixed on me. I might leave you to guess the rest. Anyway, he had not married the heiress, and he had not taken my forever to mean longer than three years.

"But I think it was Kitty that brought me back," he said—"I mean hearing of Kitty, and the little home you had made for her. How else should I have known that you really had a heart? It is a dear little home, Gail! Couldn't we enlarge it a bit so as to accommodate three?"

We live in the city now, and our home, though modest, is far larger than that forgotten little nest in beloved old Glendale. My art? Well, Kitty's voice is much finer than mine ever would have been, and we are having it thoroughly trained. John would have me take some lessons too, and he and the children, and occasionally some intimate friends, seem to enjoy my singing.

But, do you know, John declares that my real art is home-making, and his unshaken faith in this is worth all the public applause that I used to dream of winning.